

“The Day with No Name”
Sermon Series on *The Hinge of History* #2
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Palm Sunday
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(Luke 23:44-56)

Introduction.

Holy Week is full of days with big names. There is Palm Sunday, which we celebrate today. It commemorates the time Jesus made His triumphal Entry into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. Then there is Maundy Thursday. On that day we remember the night Jesus celebrated the Passover meal with His disciples, and He reinterpreted Passover and instituted the Lord’s Supper. It is also the night on which Jesus was betrayed by Judas.

Then there is Good Friday. It’s the day Jesus was tried, beaten, and then crucified. He hung between heaven and earth and bore the sins of humanity as He died the sinner’s death for you and me. And Holy Week concludes with the celebration of Easter Sunday. It’s the day Jesus rose from the dead, and He conquered sin and death for all time. The events of these big days with wonderful names are the hinge of history.

But then there is the Saturday of Holy Week. It’s a day that has no name. The Bible is full of what happened on Palm Sunday and on Maundy Thursday and on Good Friday and on Easter Sunday. But, as John Ortberg has written¹ that Saturday is the day in between. It’s the day after *this* but the day before *that*. It’s the day with no name.

However, it turns out that the Saturday of Holy Week is actually a very important day in salvation history, and it’s a day that is full of meaning and insight into the Christian experience if we stop and take a careful look at it. The Saturday of Holy Week is the time in between. It’s the day between despair and joy, between confusion and clarity, and between bad news and good news. It’s the time when we feel lost and alone. There are days, even seasons, in life when it feels like it’s the Saturday of Holy Week all the time, and we wonder if the resurrection life we’ve heard about on Easter Sunday will ever become a reality.

This morning I want you talk about this day with no name.

I. What Happened on Saturday?

Our passage tells us that after Jesus was crucified on Good Friday, a man named Joseph of Arimathea, who was a member of the Sanhedrin and had not consented to the decision of the Council, went to Pilate and asked the governor for Jesus’ body. John tells us in his gospel that Nicodemus was also with Joseph, and

together they took Jesus' body, wrapped it in linen, and placed it in a tomb that had been cut out of a rock and in which no one had ever been laid before.

A stone was rolled in front of the entrance to the tomb, and since it was Preparation Day, the day before the Jewish Sabbath, Joseph and Nicodemus went home and they rested on Saturday in obedience to the commandment of the Jewish law in the Old Testament. The passage also tells us that the women who had been with Jesus from the days He began His ministry in Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how the body was laid in it. They also went home in observance of the Sabbath, and they prepared to come back on Sunday to complete the process of burial by placing spices on the body.

The only thing that is mentioned in the Bible about what happened on Saturday is written by the gospel writer Matthew. He tells us that on Saturday, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate and asked the governor to give the order for the tomb to be made secure. Otherwise, they suggested, Jesus' disciples might come and steal the body and tell people that He had been raised from the dead. Pilate agreed to send a detail of soldiers, and they secured the tomb by putting a Roman seal on the stone to the entrance and posting a guard.

Nothing else happened on Saturday. All was quiet. The day with no name was a day on which nothing much happened. On Friday there was a great deal of activity surrounding the trial, the crucifixion, and the burial of Jesus. And on Sunday there was even more activity when Christ rose from the dead and appeared to His disciples. But on Saturday, everything was quiet. Everything was still. It was the day in between.

In his book *Who Is This Man?* John Ortberg speculates that those who followed Jesus during His earthly ministry may have gathered together on that Saturday.² Perhaps they met and reflected on how everything they believed in and dreamed of and worked so hard for had all come crashing down and fell apart when Jesus was crucified. They may have talked about what went wrong, who was to blame, and what they were going to do now. Maybe they speculated that Jesus couldn't get enough followers, or convince the chief priests, or win over the Roman authorities, or get enough ordinary people to understand His message. Maybe it was that the disciples were all just cowards, and they abandoned Him when He needed them the most.

Saturday is the day when not only Jesus died, but the dream died too. Have you ever felt like that? Did you once have a dream, and you were so hopeful for a better tomorrow, but then the dream died. It never happened. If that has ever happened to you, then you know what the disciples felt like on that Saturday.

II. What Happens to Us on Saturday?

Earlier in my sermon I said that the day with no name is the day when nothing happens, but that's not quite true. Silence happens on Saturday. After trouble hits you, after the agony of Good Friday, you call out to God and you ask Him to help. However, you don't get much of a response. On Saturday, in addition to the pain of Good Friday, there is the pain of silence and the absence of God.

When C.S. Lewis lost his wife Joy Davidman to cancer after a brief marriage, he wrote a book entitled *A Grief Observed*. In it Lewis writes very candidly:

When you are happy, so happy you have no sense of needing God, so happy you are tempted to feel His claims upon you as an interruption, if you remember yourself to turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will be – or so it feels – welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become....What can this mean? Why is He so present a commander in our time of prosperity and so very absent a help in time of trouble?³

A married woman wants to get pregnant in the worst way, but the pregnancy test keeps coming back negative month after month, year after year. A mom and dad find out their daughter has a terrible illness, and they fervently pray for their baby girl to be healed. But all they get is silence. A man applies for a job for the umpteenth time, but he receives another form-email that says, "You're not what we're looking for."

Have you ever heard these words before?

"Your position has been eliminated."

"I don't love you anymore."

"You didn't make the team."

"We're moving."

"The tumor is malignant."

"You didn't get accepted in the school."

"We think mom had a stroke. How soon can you get here?"

"Dad, uh...I'm at the police station."

"The elders are meeting tonight." (A pastor never wants to hear those words.)

You lose a job. You lose a friend. You lose your health. You lose your dream. On Friday it all dies, and the only thing you hear in response to your pleas to God on Saturday is just silence. It feels like Sunday is never going to come. Have you ever been there before?

How do you respond to situations like this? What is your reaction when you find yourself living on the Saturday of Holy Week? John Ortberg suggests that when things like this happen, some people respond with *despair*. They think, “There’s never going to be a Sunday. It’s always Friday, so just get used to it.

Other people respond to life on Saturday with *denial*. They pretend it doesn’t exist, and they try to whistle in the dark. They come up with simplistic explanations, easy answers, and artificial pleasantries. It results in forced optimism, clichéd formulas, and false triumphalism.

But, Ortberg says, there are still other people who have eyes of faith and respond to life on a Saturday with *hopeful waiting*. They know the story isn’t finished being written yet, and they are waiting for God to do something new. It’s an opportunity for transformational growth as you keep your eyes on the promises of God and look in faith for His appearing.

III. The Gift of Holy Saturday.

The day with no name raises an odd question – Why is there a Saturday at all? It doesn’t seem to further the story line the least little bit. Why didn’t God just get on with it and raise Jesus from the dead the very next day? It seems strange for God to spread out the events over a three-day period. However, a closer look reveals that Saturday should mark us just as much as Good Friday and Easter Sunday do. Let me explain.

In the Bible there are several what are known as third-day stories.⁴ The apostle Paul even refers to this in his first letter to the Corinthians. “*For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures*” (1Cor. 15:3,4). Paul says that this three-day sequence was in *accordance with the Scriptures*. Where did he get that?

The Old Testament is filled with third-day stories. For example, when Abraham was afraid he was going to have to sacrifice his son Isaac, it was *on the third day* of their journey when Abraham saw the ram in the thicket which God provided for the sacrifice that saved his son’s life. When the prophet Jonah was cast into the sea and then swallowed by a great fish, it was *on the third day* that the whale spit him out. The spies from Israel were told by Rahab to hide from their enemies, and they would be safe *on the third day*. And when Esther heard that her people were going to be slaughtered, she went away to fast and pray. And it was *on the third day* that she went to the king who received her favorably, and the Israelites were delivered.

This was such a recurring pattern in the Bible that the prophet Hosea even said, “*Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces....After two days He will revive us; on the third day He will restore us, that we may live in His*

presence” (*Hosea 6:1-2*). All the third-day stories in the Bible have the same structure. On the first day there’s trouble, and on the third day there’s deliverance. And on the second day there is nothing – just the continuation of the trouble.

The problem with third-day stories is that you don’t know it’s a third-day story until the third day. When it’s Friday and when it’s Saturday, as far as you know deliverance is never going to come. It may just be a one-day story, and that one day of trouble may last for the rest of your life. You just don’t know.

Is life a third-day story, or is it just one day of trouble repeated over and over again? Does history simply repeat itself, or does God have a plan and it is going somewhere? Is my life going somewhere? The events of Holy Week involving the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ proclaim the truth that life is indeed a third-day story, and there is always a reason to hope. No matter how desperate things may appear at the time, no matter how silent God may feel to you right now, God always has another move He can make. And Jesus is in the business of bringing life out of death, light into the darkness, and hope in the midst of despair.

I’ve come to see that the day with no name is actually a remarkable gift God has given us, and there are many blessings for the person who has eyes of faith to learn how to see them. It all depends on your perspective and how you look at life.

Conclusion.

On Holy Saturday the work of redemption was not yet complete. It was a time of waiting for the consummation of what God was doing in the world. And it symbolizes the way in which we wait for the consummation of the drama of salvation when the Lord will return one day and create a new heaven and a new earth. You and I live in this in-between time.

From a human perspective, most Christians think of the miraculous day of Holy week as Easter Sunday, the day when Jesus rose from the dead. However, what if from heaven’s point of view the greater miracle really happened on Saturday? The miracle of Easter Sunday is that a dead man lives. But the miracle of Holy Saturday is that the eternal God lies dead in a tomb. And Jesus’ death brought salvation to the world.

The Apostles’ Creed says that Jesus “descended into hell.” Theologians disagree over what this sentence in the Creed really means. For example, John Calvin believed Jesus went into hell as a helpless victim in order to experience the ultimate suffering, degradation, and humiliation that the world can know on our behalf. However, Martin Luther had another take on it. He believed that Jesus went into hell endowed with the power to rescue, and He went there to invade enemy territory. As someone in our part of the world might say, "He went there to kick some tail and take some names!"

There is a medieval painting called "The Harrowing of Hell" which depicts the moment in Ephesians where it says, "*Jesus descended to the lower parts to lead out a train of captives.*" The painting shows Jesus, the mighty Christ, just as He has burst out of the gates of hell. With one hand He is freeing Adam, and with the other He is freeing Eve. Beneath His feet is Satan – bound, gagged and immobilized. The actions of Satan and all who carry out evil are the desperate acts of a defeated enemy. Why? Because Jesus is a Savior who has been to hell and back for us! The grave could not hold Him, and in the resurrection Jesus overcame sin and death forever. He bore our punishment in order to rescue us from the clutches of hell itself.

Christ faced the worst terror the world has to offer, and He overcame it with His love. This can give us hope as we seek to cope with terror in our world on the Saturday of Holy Week or any other day. It's a promise to you and me that He that is in us is stronger than he that is in the world. We need not fear Satan or any of his cronies of terror. He is a dog on a leash that has been vanquished by Christ the conqueror.

There is nothing that you and I have to fear on Saturday as long as we trust in God. As Martin Luther wrote in his great hymn *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*:

And though this world, with devils filled

Should threaten to undo us,

We will not fear, for God hath willed

His truth to triumph through us.

The Prince of Darkness grim,

We tremble not for him

His rage we can endure,

For lo, his doom is sure;

One little word shall fell him.

That little word is the name of Jesus! He is the hinge of history! So when you get to the Saturday of this Holy Week in just a few days, or anytime when you find yourself in a place in which you feel like your dream has died or you're waiting for God to show up, cling to these truths as you wait for the Lord. He will bring you Easter joy in due time. Believe it, and trust God more! Amen.

¹ John Ortberg, *Who Is This Man?* p. 183. I'm indebted to John for a number of the ideas in this sermon, as well as an article by Philip Yancey in *Christianity Today* back in 1996.

² *Ibid*, p. 183.

³ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, pp. 4-5.

⁴ John Ortberg, *Who Is This Man?* pp. 177-178.